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Review of "No Look Pass"

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on August 24, 2011

No Look Pass is one of the best queer documentaries of the year – arguably of the last several. Equally an in-depth character study and a riveting sports documentary, it features **Emily "Etay" Tay**, a young lesbian basketball star with a traditional Asian family, a tremendous wealth of talent, and all of the baggage that comes along with both. Director **Melissa Johnson** (herself a former basketball star) has found an incredible story – and an even more incredible subject – in Emily.

We first meet Emily practicing hoops and introducing us to her family and her current life as one of the most humble (and truest) stars of the Harvard University women's basketball team. Emily is enormously talented but painfully unsure of herself, a phenom whose roots as a working class first-generation American – basically, the opposite of her teammates – weigh on her every day. We meet her mother and father, who dote on her, but also clearly don't understand their child. Mom thinks success will come for Emily once she marries rich and, at one point in the film, she even tries to push an arranged marriage on her.

Soon after, we're introduced to Katie, Emily's best friend and almost-constant companion, who begins her first interview with "She's Asian! I've never seen an Asian basketball player before!" Katie is hilarious, sort of like everyone's favorite outspoken jockette friend, and she's intensely loyal to Emily.

We watch as Emily flies through her senior season at Harvard. She has a girlfriend that she's unsure of, a hankering to be done with school ("I'm so over Harvard," she muses in one interview), and an intense desire to play pro basketball in Europe. We learn all of this in short interview clips cut in with footage from the games, tense locker-room chat, and the fun, relaxed scenes of Emily and Katie chatting casually at home, hanging out.

The sports footage – and editing – is pure ESPN tension and excitement. Harvard is on the edge of winning the Ivy League title, and "Ninja" (Emily's slightly not-PC nickname) is the star of the show. We watch her fly through the air, make crazy shots, and easily line up her signature "no look" passes. She's a pleasure to watch, and pure superstar material, though her coach is constantly telling her to get her head "out of her ass" when she becomes too introverted to lead effectively.

Emily's sexuality is a major part of the film. She knew by her freshman year that she is a lesbian, and she's out to her teammates, though she is the only queer woman (and person of color, for that matter) on the whole team. She is certainly not out to her parents – who she is terribly afraid of disappointing. Her folks came to the US in 1980 with \$65 in their pockets, and have given absolutely everything to their children – especially Emily, who is their shining star. That pressure isn't lost on her, and she acknowledges early on that the film will basically "out" her as soon as it is released.

The second half of the film is largely concerned with Emily and Katie's post-college career, playing for a German team. There's enough drama to fill an entire season of reality TV here, with euphoric first visits to European cities, tough games, and backstabbing teammates. To top it all off, Emily is in a relationship with an American soldier – a woman who risks everything to even be in the movie thanks to the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

Again, the mix of intense sports documentary and personal coming-of-age tale is perfectly balanced, as Emily deals with each of the pressures on her in turn.

Of course, the whole film would sink if our protagonist wasn't likable, but Emily Tay comes off as a genuine, endearing young woman. We feel for her predicaments (coming out, feeling out of place among almost all-white teammates, dealing with a traditional family that she loves), and cheering when things go right. As electric and powerful as she is on the court, it's in her personal interviews and casual "follow-along" scenes where she fully comes to life as a person.

Best of all, she's charming and funny, quick with a joke or dose of sarcasm when she gets frustrated. One early sequence in Germany – where she is learning to drive – is gut-bustingly funny. Other conversations between Katie and Emily, about being butch vs. femme, for example, are light-hearted and often hilarious.

She pokes gentle fun at Katie and her family, while never for a moment letting us doubt where her loyalty lies. In scene after scene, she's depicted as a loving daughter, despite the frustrations she has with her family. She even tears up in one sequence when her parents explain the conditions under which they came to the US, and she tells them just how proud she is.

None of it is maudlin or played for tears – one of *No Look Pass's* greatest strengths is in just how honest and raw and real the whole affair feels. No conversations appear forced or staged, none of the basketball footage is over-edited or too flashy, and everyone depicted seems like someone we can all relate to.

This is a masterful piece of documentary filmmaking, at once powerful, accessible and endlessly entertaining. The production team can't be commended enough, nor can Emily, Katie and company, for putting on the most honest show of a lifetime. Screw the NBA – if you want to see basketball at its best, and a player with talent and heart to spare, take a shot at *No Look Pass*. ■